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MUSIC, LITERATURE, AND THE CREATIVE PROCESS: AN INTERVIEW WITH COMPOSER CHESTER BISCARDI



One of the joys of being a musician is finding a composer who you know as a "friend" from the first time you play the music. When this magic happens, learning the music is as easy and rewarding as a conversation with a good friend. Things just make sense, no translation required.

Chester Biscardi is one such composer for me. And because he contacted me years ago after watching a video of my performance of his piece "Incitation to Desire (Tango), Chet and I became friends outside the lines of his music. Our shared Italian-American heritage, love of writing and literature, and similar outlook on topics big and small caused us to joke recently that we must be related (both our ancestors came from Calabria). It's easy to forget that Chet's music is performed and recorded all over the world, and that his numerous awards include the Rome Prize and an Academy Award in Music from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. In the midst of finishing a commission, adjusting to life while transitioning out of his 43 year career at Sarah Lawrence (and coping with the pandemic's effects on New York City), Chet generously agreed to be interviewed for No Dead Guys. Here are Chet's thoughts on music, literature, and the creative process (and a very good recipe for insalata caprese!).

from NO DEAD GUYS: A PIANO BLOG, Rhonda Rizzo

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The only things changed to your original questions were removing “**literature and**” from question two, and adding “(*Tango*)” to make it *Incitation to Desire (Tango)* in the third question. Oh, and an added diacritic for Takemitsu: **Tôru** (question five).

You hold degrees in English literature, Italian literature, and composition. What encouraged you to choose composition as your career and creative path?

I started writing music at about age nine but stopped when I was sixteen because my family wanted me to become a lawyer and get involved with politics. During freshman registration in 1966 at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, I stood between Old Music Hall and the Law School and wondered what to do. I was seventeen and felt that I had to opt for pre-law-type courses, which, luckily for my future work as a composer, included English literature. Although there was an implicit admonishment at home to not learn to speak Italian (“You’re an American!”), I took beginning Italian, spent my senior year at the university and conservatory in Bologna, and ended up finishing a master’s degree in Italian literature in 1972 before switching to the master’s program in composition. I was twenty-two. I had started writing music again out of some deep, mysterious and urgent need. I knew that it had to be in a new way, however. And at the same time, I also came out as a gay man.

As an Italian kid raised in Kenosha, Wisconsin, who or what introduced you to the music that has shaped your career?

I grew up in a mostly immigrant Italian neighborhood near Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Catholic church where I served as an altar boy starting at age seven. This was years before Vatican II and folk masses (I was born in 1948), so I heard the parish nuns singing Gregorian Chant at 6:00 AM Mass—those long, curly lines certainly an early influence. Fast forward to 2012 and *Footfalls (after Beckett)*, my musical response to one of Beckett’s ghost plays, which opens with the first nine notes of the Latin hymn “Veni Creator Spiritus” that morph into the protagonist’s slow, relentless retracing of her nine steps. At home my father (who died when I was twelve) played the accordion by ear and serenaded my mother with Italian love songs. At a relative’s house I heard Rachmaninoff play his second piano concerto on 78s, the packaged set with his large, gnarly hands on the cover. Erica Morini on another set of 78s performed the Tchaikovsky violin concerto with its haunting second (*Canzonetta*: Andante) movement. I also learned how to play the piano on their spinet.

In the ‘50s the Wisconsin Public School System had a great music program, hard to believe now when the arts are sidelined even in higher education. I was given a French horn when I was nine because they needed one in the orchestra. The case was heavier and bigger than I was, and when I couldn’t practice because of yet another cold I begged for a violin (3/4 size at first), which I had wanted in the first place. And that’s when I decided that I needed to write music as well. I was nine. I still have the score for an early piece called “Happy and Sad,” so telling as to the emotional nature of the music I would write as an adult. Primal emotions, for sure.

In Chicago I saw new Broadway musicals on their national tours at the Schubert Theatre, such as *My Fair Lady* and *Fiorello*. When I was sixteen, I sat on the grass on hot summer nights at the Ravinia Festival, the summer home of the Chicago Symphony, and for the first time heard the music of Tôru Takemitsu, a new work for piano and orchestra entitled *Arc*, with Yûji Takahashi on the piano and Seiji Ozawa conducting. What I didn’t know then is that I would meet Takemitsu at Yale in 1976 and that we would remain friends until his untimely death in 1996.

For much of your career you have been “interested in the ways literature influences music and form.” Can you elaborate on how this has shaped your compositions, especially *Incitation to Desire (Tango)*, *In Time’s Unfolding*, and *Companion Piece (for Morton Feldman)*—three pieces I’ve performed, recorded, and blogged about in earlier posts?

Interestingly, of the three solo piano works that you seem to already “know” in some sort of deep intuitive way and so lovingly and richly interpret and make your own, only the titles actually come into play for the tango and for *In Time’s Unfolding*. “Incitation to Desire” comes from the “Tango” entry in the 1944 Edition of *Grove’s Dictionary of Music and Musicians*: “The movements of the dance are less presentable to a polite audience than those of the Habanera, and as now performed in the cafés chantants of Madrid and other cities of Spain the Tango has become nothing but an incitation to desire.” That entry also provided me with my interpretation of tango form. The title for *In Time’s Unfolding* comes from Galway Kinnell’s 1990 eleven-part poem, “When One Has Lived a Long Time Alone”, where “as the conscious one among those others/uttering their compulsory cries of being here . . . all of them in time’s unfolding/trying to cry themselves into self-knowing -/one knows one is here to hear them into shining . . .”, which also provides the emotional narrative of the work.

Connections are clearer in my earlier work. For instance, in the 1975 *Tenzone*, for two flutes and piano, requested by Takemitsu for his Music Today ’76 Festival in Tokyo, I pay homage to the lyrical and expressive qualities found in his 1959 *Masque*, for two flutes. The title of my work comes from the Italian *tenzone*, a lyric interchange in medieval Italy and Provence (*tenson*), usually between two poets, concerning topical poetic devices and ideas. T.S. Eliot’s “Burnt Norton”, with its interplay of form and time, evoked *At the Still Point* written for the Rome Symphony in 1976, the “still point” being where past and future meet. The placement of four orchestral sub-groups allows the music to flow in a certain spatial way and also accounts for the pulling of the pitches into and out of their “frozen” registration, or placement. *Mestiere* in 1979 and *Di Vivere*, a 1981 quintet that is a response to the solo piano work, take their titles and share the same source of inspiration from Cesare Pavese’s collected journals, *Il mestiere di vivere* (1935-1950) (*The Business of Living*). And the title of the 1980 *Trasumanar*, for twelve percussionists and piano, comes from a word coined by Dante to describe the experience of rising above the human state. At the beginning of the *Paradiso*, Dante’s human nature is transmuted to a higher level. He is left bewildered by the sensual pull of being human and the spiritual aspiration to transcend human experience. The dramatic tension created by this struggle provides the structural framework of the work.

Have other art forms influenced your compositions, and if so, which ones?

Painting for sure. Tamayo’s Aztec colorations crept into the textures of *Di Vivere*, for clarinet in A and piano, with flute, violin and violoncello (1981). During the writing of the work I took a trip to Mexico where I discovered Tamayo’s paintings and how they reflect Aztec fresco colors—green, red, white, and black. His 1979 *Hombre con pipa* was tacked on my studio wall. In 1986, after finishing *Tight-Rope*, an opera that had a story line and characters to develop, I was struggling with how to structure a modern-day sonata. A visit to a retrospective of lithographs by Jasper Johns at the Museum of Modern Art gave me my answer. His *Voice 2* had gone through three transformations: originally an oil and collage triptych (1971), later a three-panel lithograph (1982), and in a final version, a nine-panel interchangeable series made up of three copies of the 1982 lithograph. Johns borrows material from earlier works and utilizes

overlapping, extension, and repetition as the main ingredients of form. *Piano Sonata* is divided into three sections which reflect three musical textures: angular and pulsating, fast runs and chords, and lyrical. As with Johns' series, the three sections of my sonata evolve into nine interactive sections and a coda. And there's dramatic structure learned from the theatre, as in my response to Beckett's *Footfalls*. And photography, too. The musical ideas and form of the 2015 *Photo | Pier | Moonlight*, for violin duo, were suggested by a series of photographs entitled *Pier 18 – Rows of Prints* (1971) by Jan Dibbets that reflect variations in the settings of the actual camera used as well as variations created by transformations of the environment itself being pictured, both progressing from very light to almost black.

Certainly, borrowings from the music of others as well as from my own work plays an important role in how I put things together. For instance, in 2000 the Music Library Association commissioned me to write a work for solo piano for their 70th Anniversary in New York City in 2001 that would "look forward and reflect backward at the same time." A bit daunting. In response *In Time's Unfolding* reflects the past and celebrates the moment in which time unfolds over a musical landscape that is at once poignant and painful, lonely, exuberant, heroic, and—in a concentrated way—epic. I evoke my childhood memories of music by Schumann, Gershwin and Copland that interweave with self-references to several of my earlier piano works—*Mestiere*, *Piano Concerto*, *Piano Sonata*, and *Companion Piece (for Morton Feldman)*, and the song, "Recovering". Schumann's influence appears as a direct quote from the opening of *Carnaval* as a way of moving the work forward, while I incorporated the sounds of Gershwin and Copland to subtly resonate in the texture of my work without directly imitating their music. The opening measures were suggested by the simple and stunning repeated two-chord introduction of Keith Jarrett's version of "Something to Remember You By" on his 1999 solo recording, *The Melody at Night, with You*.

Pretty much everything has the potential to spark and open up my creative thinking. In fact, when I'm reading, looking, listening, I'm also constantly filtering everything that I'm experiencing, asking the question: Is there something here that I want to explore? Make in to a piece? Write about? Even meditation. On January 13, 1981, when writing *Di Vivere*, I wrote in my journal: "I was impressed today in a yoga class by how I feel so isolated while doing certain positions—very personal—but then all of a sudden I straighten up, turn my head to the side, and realize that there is a larger world, more expansive, brighter than just my own warmth and my own presence. And then back to that inner world. It is the isolated world of the clarinet and piano being enhanced by the trio of flute, violin and 'cello in *Di Vivere*."

One of the things that most impressed me about your compositional style is your masterful use of time and space. You're not afraid of pauses or silences; you give the music space to breathe and "just be." How much did your work with Tôru Takemitsu and your friendship with Morton Feldman influence your sense of time in music?

Really, this is one of those conversations about talent and intuition versus learning skills—nature versus nurture, I suppose—which are endless and about which there are no clear answers. There's really no explanation as to why a composer—or a performer—or any artist, for that matter—"feels" something specifically and then shapes it into a creative work. You just "know" something. It's part of your cellular make-up, as I describe above about your interpretation and performance of my work.

For some inexplicable reason, I already had an intuitive sense of what I thought were the aesthetics of traditional Japanese music even before I first heard Takemitsu's music: transparent textures and delicate nuances; sounds frozen in space; circular musical forms; and a kind of mobile fixity where tensions expand and contrast against a background of stillness. I had heard the famous shakuhachi piece, *Kokû Reibo* (*Bell Ringing in an Empty Sky*) before that, and eventually I was moved to further explore Japanese culture. I even spent part of 1990 in Tokyo working with Japanese composers and performers of both traditional and contemporary music under a fellowship from The Japan Foundation. I also spent time with Takemitsu at concerts in Tokyo, at his favorite restaurants where he introduced me to new and exotic tastes and colors, and with his family at their home in Higashi Murayama City. When I first met him in 1976 he mostly talked about Japanese gardens, the relationship of stone to sand to sky, and responded to music viscerally and not with any sense of formal analysis. This was immensely refreshing to me coming from our Western traditions. And to me he was the embodiment of the "other"—something outside of myself—and what I assumed was the calm, intuitive Zen nature of the Far East. In other words, everything outside of my own experience.

For me the most striking feature of Japanese music is the concept of *ma*, or "negative space". In music it's "silence". An absence of sound. What lies between. That became clearer to me by simply watching the way people conversed in the East as compared to the way we converse in the West. In the West, we are afraid of letting a moment go by without filling it in with continuous sound. In the East, a momentary pause is an essential, respected part of a conversation.

For me the aesthetic theory of *jo-ha-kyû*, implicit in the structure of, well, everything in Japan, is as important. *Jo* means the introduction, *ha* the breaking apart or exposition, and *kyû* the rushing to the finish or the denouement. Musical compositions, paintings, a performance of *kabuki*, the tea ceremony, the seasons themselves all reflect this three-part form.

As I mentioned before, I was especially interested in the use of space—registrar and physical—and how that generates the form of a work when I was writing *At the Still Point*. I explored ideas of emptiness, an introverted sense of time, movement and space, the "mobile fixity" expressed in the image of the "still point". I created areas of "frozen registration"—where a tone remained in a certain place until intuitively I feel that it must move, from which it tried to break free. My dealing with form in this way came from a constant referral back to material already presented, a reevaluation of musical ideas that are continually related in a new context—a process which attempts to incorporate past as well as future ideas in the present moment. And that is very much what the Japanese "circular nature" of the world is all about. *Mestiere* borrows a three-note gesture and a chord from Takemitsu's *Piano Distance* (1961), where the music is the direct and natural result of sounds themselves—a concept very dear to Takemitsu and central in his music.

In some ways I consider some aspects of Feldman's music to be a kind of Americanization of Zen ideas. His concept of minimalism was to me is a more expressive exploration of space, time, the sparse use of individual sounds, and transparency than the motoric minimalism that we normally associate with the music of, say, Glass and Reich.

I first met Morton Feldman in 1979 at his apartment in Buffalo in 1979. He talked about his music and compositional techniques that has had as lasting an impact on me as did his intense passion for his collections of ancient Oriental, Turkish and Iroquois carpets. He encouraged me to get

close to the floor and look at their textures, reliefs, orchestration, what he called “symmetry even through imperfection,” and explained how he was translating these impressions into the musical notes of the string quartet that he was writing. In 1989, after his untimely death, *Companion Piece (for Morton Feldman)*, for contrabass and piano, paid homage to those imperfect symmetries with my musical reflections on his *Extensions* 3, written for solo piano in 1952. In particular, the last four bars of his piece—a poignant repeated figure—become a repetitive idea in *Companion Piece (for Morton Feldman)* that expresses loss and leads to stillness. When the Da Capo Chamber Ensemble requested a work for clarinet and piano in 1981, I found that idea to be so daunting that I became creatively blocked. So, I went to complain to Feldman and said: “It’s difficult to write for two instruments.” To which he replied: “Think of the piano and clarinet; add horn (then take it out); add violin, pizz. (then take it out), etc. Arrive at piano and clarinet!” His advice to me was akin to a Japanese aesthetic that suggests that one should remove everything unessential in order to strengthen a work of art. So, I “added” the flute, violin and ‘cello as a way of “pulling” the colors out of the clarinet and piano duo, and they became permanent residents. But the work is structured in such a way that it could be performed as simply a duet for clarinet and piano.

Tell me about your compositional language, one I’d describe as “high-low”. In other words, you shift seamlessly between intricate compositional ideas and vernacular phrases like jazz riffs, and you fearlessly blend thorny tone clusters with lyrical melodies.

I’m not sure about “jazz riffs” per se, although, if isolated, many of my complex harmonies are probably unintentional and lost jazz-infused chords! Yes, I think you’re right in hearing these shifts between different musical worlds, but I’m not consciously making that happen. When I was a kid growing up in the Midwest and not knowing the sophistication of the classical contemporary world—that included everything from the beginning of the century with Schoenberg and Stravinsky and Bartok, and Rachmaninoff (a composer living during modernism but inhabiting romantic and eminently accessible wolf’s clothing), all still hanging around, and into the ‘60s with conceptual art and John Cage, and so on, my aesthetic basis was the classics—Bach, Brahms, Chopin, Mendelssohn, Mozart, Schumann, as well as the American Songbook and musicals, i.e., Gershwin, Cole Porter, Rogers & Hammerstein. I wanted to be George Gershwin, and if I couldn’t be Gershwin, well, I’d have to do something else with my life—like become a lawyer or a priest! When I “returned” to compose in my early twenties and ended up actually studying music more formally in Madison and then at Yale, I was straddling the world of late modernism—feeling the pull of complex organization and a largely chromatic language—and all of the other isms, including neoromanticism, minimalism, etc. The academy suggested that modernism was the way, and I—Italian and lyrical and emotional—kind of worked in that atmosphere until George and Sergei and several other beloved composers pulled at my heart strings. I wasn’t alone. The fact is that minimalism, neoromanticism, and electronic and other experimental music were also at play. With composers like Jack Beeson on the composition faculty, Columbia, for instance, was not as much a bastion of “Uptown Music” as has been previously assumed

By 2000 I think that I had totally accepted the fact that “beautiful” could be expressed in many different ways and musical languages. I knew that with my 1983 *Piano Concerto* and the 1984 tango I was already going down the path of including “romantic” elements in my music. This has been a long way of explaining why so many diverse things can coexist in my work, but these things always need context. And I am cognizant of shaping the materials I have in order to make sure there’s a seamless continuity to what I’m trying to say.

One of the things that keeps pulling me back to your music is how deeply you capture the human experience in notes—the joy, sadness, humor, lust, loneliness, warmth and ultimately hope. Playing it feels like a conversation with an accepting friend. In your opinion, how much of this comes from your love of literature and how much comes from a deep immersion in life?

I'm coming to this question last since it is probably the most difficult one to adequately answer, and I have already covered so much territory with my other responses. It would be amazing to think that I have control over what's going on in the sub-conscious and unconscious worlds. Over the years I've become more and more aware that the "surface" of a work (tuneful? beautiful? consonant?) can more easily reach out to the listener than what lurks below it. Yes, of course, I have all of those feelings that we all share of "joy, sadness, humor, lust, loneliness, warmth and ultimately hope"—and, my addition, loss. So, yes, I do have the responsibility of creating a surface the hopefully invites listeners into more deeply personal places, deep in the unconscious where so much meaning lies. And I love your observation that it feels like a conversation with an accepting friend. I truly hope so. As far as literature and the plethora of other possible influences, they really only serve as scaffolding to ideas and feelings that I shape into a musical experience. And as you ask, the music really comes from a deep immersion in life.

I fell in love with your music through your piano pieces, yet your catalog includes operas, orchestral works, music for chamber ensembles, soloists, voice, and chorus as well as incidental music for theater, dance and television. What instruments or ensembles do you find the most natural fit for your compositional language?

I don't think that my music necessarily fits naturally into any one genre. When I'm finally happy with a musical idea, it tells me where it wants to go and in what container it wants to fill. Of course, I don't necessarily have much to say over certain commissions and the makeup of solo instruments, or voice, or larger ensembles. I often do add my own "touches." For example, a request for a horn trio ended up including a viola, because I felt that I needed another timbre and range that would bridge the horn with the violin and piano. Takemitsu asked for a flute duo. I added a piano to give depth to the sonic experience and help move the piece forward. Each genre makes its own demands and each idea will choose its own form. And stylistically, so much depends on the requirements of the genre. When I wrote *Tight-Rope*, I realized that every character needed different musical ideas and often different styles. Often I thought that I was losing my mind when an individual character would demand to be heard in a specific way. I quickly understood what my novelist friends would tell me about their characters inhabiting every corner of their homes. I also do know what you're asking. I think that the piano is my go-to instrument for its ability to express the more delicate of nuances and the most dynamic of sounds, percussive or otherwise, capable of such amazing voicings. I love harmonics on just about everything, but, clearly, strings and guitar and (gulp) harp produce them in such focused and beautiful ways. It's increasingly more difficult to write for larger ensembles, and, in any case, I love working with the intimate nature of small ensembles and yet be able to convey a full, encompassing sound.

Tell me about the Rome Prize and an Academy Award in Music, two of the many awards you've received.

Ah! Let's see. A year in Rome in 1976-77. Liszt (who lived in my studio, the Casa Rustica, a few years before), lizards (*lucertole*), figs on trees ripe for the picking, the sensuality of sunsets reflecting off of orange-red stones of *palazzi* and iconic ruins, the food (nothing is better than sitting down to an *insalata caprese* made up of *mozzarella di bufala*, deep-green and rich olive oil, succulent *pomodori* that actually taste like tomatoes, plenty of fresh basil, a pinch of salt, and a cold glass of crisp, white wine—perhaps a Gavi). After Bologna, Rome was another marker for me in settling into my Italian roots, even though they originated in Calabria, including residencies in Bellagio and Bogliasco, and living and teaching at various times in Florence. The camaraderie of fellow residents in all of the arts and humanities, the sharing of work and interchange of ideas, was formative for me in opening up to the endless possibilities of what collaboration can mean. Learning from other artists and scholars is a privilege, and it set the stage for me to duplicate that experience at numerous other artist colonies in the States and abroad. And it was also the beginning of my gathering ideas from everything around me that still feeds my work and was the basis of a new-model seminar/workshop—The Creative Process: Influence & Resonance—that I offered this past spring as my “swan song” to Sarah Lawrence.

The American Academy of Arts and Letters is one of those institutions that also gather together artists and scholars in many fields, and I was surprised to receive the Charles E. Ives Scholarship during my second year at Yale based on an anonymous submission. Entering the doorway was a little bit like what I would feel the following year when I walked up the endless flight of marble stairs to the entrance to The Academy in Rome: a kind of paradise. I needed to first sign in, and the fellow in front of me was Edward Albee. On the stage readying to receive the award I sat next to, let's see, Allen Ginsberg, Louise Nevelson, Tennessee Williams . . . Where was I?! In 2007 I revisited what used to also be named “Institute” to receive one of that year's Academy Awards in Music. Not quite the same as for a movie star, but I felt like one! And immensely thankful for the honor and for the impact that it would have on my life in the musical community. Milton Babbitt introduced the award in his inimitable way: “When Chester Biscardi was awarded (in 1975) a Charles Ives Scholarship by the Academy, it was for a body of compositions that was predominantly and singularly vocal, reflecting the composer's study of and devotion to literature, particularly Italian Literature. The music has changed but the poetry remains, not only in the vocal music but in the chamber and orchestral music, as the composer himself asserts in one of his later works: *The Viola Had Suddenly Become a Voice*. One can foresee that, in the shapeliness of creative things to come, there will be even longer lyrical lines, illuminating other lines and speech lines in a developing succession and contextual counterpoint unprecedented and unparalleled.” What better tribute and encouragement than The Shapeliness of Creative Things to Come!

You've just retired from your position as Director of the music program at Sarah Lawrence College. In the nearly 43 years you taught there, how did you balance teaching and composing, and what will you miss most that job?

My take on Sarah Lawrence from the start was that my task was going to be about helping young talented students immerse themselves in music while they were, hopefully, deeply engaged in everything else—literature, physics, psychology, history, writing, the other creative arts—why studying an art in the context of the liberal arts is so important and so deeply enriching as far as one's soul and one's creative expression. I was excited to help them bring all of life's experiences to their music, whether they were composers or conductors or performers. You actually have to have something to write music about, and, if you are a singer, knowing the mix of a color palette might inform how you interpret songs, or, as a pianist, being able to perform a

work by Frederik Rzewski knowing the nature of political protest and anger and perhaps, hopefully, love. I start with that statement because I need to say upfront that if you choose to spend part of your life mentoring young people you need to take that role seriously. And that takes an immense amount of time, focus and energy.

That being said, I'm very happy with what I've written in between classes, during breaks, on sabbaticals, and on fellowships—a lot of notes actually got in between and above and below those iconic five lines and four spaces. I will miss the scheduled interactions and connections with the students, whether in a seminar or during individual tutorials. I try to meet each student where they are and help them realize what they want to say. So much of teaching for me is about sharing, learning about students' lives and knowledge and technical abilities and then helping them seek out their own answers to creative—and life—problems. In that interchange I also learn more about myself and what I want to say as a composer—and as a writer, too. I've kept a journal since 1972 when, coincidentally, I began writing music in a new way and I self-identified as a gay man. In other words, I wanted to keep a record of new beginnings. And, as far as continuing to teach, sooner or later I do plan on hanging back up my shingle to offer tutorials to composers who want to further explore their craft and their life, something I've often done before.

What current and future composition projects are you most excited about?

I've been using this summer as a transition into—back into in a total way—my work, sharpening all of my pencils several times over, and looking for a new path, new ways of doing things as far as living and being creative. No one planned on this inconceivable mess that plagues the entire world: an invisible bug everywhere, and the protests resulting from the persistent and pernicious realities of racial, gender and income inequalities. So, it's a daunting time to finally be “free in isolation” and try to figure out what I can do as an individual. Does it have anything to do with making art? I have yet to understand all of that. What's relevant and is that important? What's universal? What's old fashioned and what's trending, and does any of that matter? I've never felt comfortable in being overtly political in my music, evoking current events, directly expressing anger, or writing music that numbs the anxieties of being alive in an uncertain time. In 1995 I was invited to be part of the first volume on CRI of *Gay American Composers*, a compilation of music by living American composers who identify as being gay. At first I wasn't sure that I wanted to be on the recording. It would mean revealing myself as being “gay” in a public way. Part of the struggle of being an artist—for me at least—is wanting to be universal, not to limit your audience. Where does one's sexual orientation fit in? As I said before, my music was at first abstract and atonal, but at the same time always lyrical and dramatic. Forced to describe it in words, I would say it is also “sensual,” “open,” “intimate,” “visceral”. Is that what it means to write “gay” music? I don't think so. I am many things, and “gay” is one of the things I am. It is part of a composite that defines my life and my work. I have always felt strongly that the way I choose to live my life and write my music—as a full human being with a variety of concerns—is the most powerful and personal political statement I can make. I eventually realized that being able to announce all of that to the world was actually very important.

As far as getting back to writing music, I started off this summer by making a version of my viola and piano piece, *The Viola Had Suddenly Become a Voice*, written in memory of the violist Jacob Glick, for cello and piano, requested by a group in the Netherlands. It's infinitely easier to rethink and arrange a work that's fully formed, and in this case the most difficult task was to figure out how to rewrite the piano part to work with the lower range of the cello with its rich and dynamic

textures and still keep the piano's identity and role in tact. This version is called *Suddenly Cello*. I'm also at the beginning stages of a commission from The Roger Shapiro Fund for a new work for guitarist/composer/author David Leisner. So far I've been able to successfully retune my guitar (a wonderful Alvarez, interestingly Japan-made, which I bought in the '70s in order to play Beatles' tunes, which I did as badly as trying to produce sounds out of a shakuhachi, which I studied in Tokyo). And a few sketches that I've shared with David over Zoom eagerly looking for his expert advice and often seeing wry grins in response to some of my ideas. I think back to 1995 when I wrote a work for the Anderson/Fader Duo called *Resisting Stillness*. It took me months to figure out the right strings, fingering, harmonics—natural and artificial—and the right notation to make my musical ideas understood on the page. My process of composition is best described as putting down one note one day and erasing it the next. I often liken it to being given one of those thin, insubstantial wooden toothpicks to carve out music from a huge hunk of unpolished marble.

I need to get back to a work for violin and piano commissioned three years ago as an homage to the violinist Lilo Kantorowicz, much in the spirit of the viola piece but perhaps a bit more elegiac. I'm also beginning to add on to a collection of short piano works. And then more extended works, including finishing a work for solo piano begun in 2014 as a work for harp (another impossible instrument for which to write if you're not a harpist) and based on my perspective of Orpheus. And most definitely more songs and perhaps other song cycles. I really just need to get back to a routine of sitting at the piano even if I have no ideas at all and see what happens. I need that visceral connection to sound. And if ideas for larger ensembles appear—even another opera or a work for musical theatre (any librettists or lyricists out there?)—well, that would be great, too!

What advice can you offer to an aspiring composer?

Open yourself to everything. Don't be afraid of looking back and learning from music from the past and finding influences and techniques from creators outside of your comfort zone. The only way, really, to find your unique voice is to build on what you know and explore what you don't, and, in some cases rebel against.

Keep a journal. Write, draw, sing, using whatever best suits your imagination—a traditionally lined or unlined journal, a sketch book, a digital file, and so on. Journaling is something that documents your life, personal experiences, creative process and working methods, and someplace that you can revisit, filtering and highlighting ideas you initially discovered and considered important. It's another way of further evolving your ideas—a kind of "creative retrospection". In other words, a way to look back and reflect on your own life as a way to move forward.

And, you know, the usual advice: don't worry about failure, otherwise you'll never risk learning anything new in order to move forward. Play! Be a kid again. And remember that making art is about your soul and the human spirit as much as the beckoning of the market place is a very powerful attraction—and distraction.

Thank you, Rhonda, for providing these insightful questions and forum for my thoughts!